



- a mid-stream report of the CITIGEN research network

Insights along the way

The advent of the information society has transformed reality on a global scale. For the project of feminist social change, this has ushered in not just a whole new set of tools and technologies to work with, but the possibility of a new order of freedom in building and sustaining resistances on a rapidly shifting canvas of complex challenges. While there is much to celebrate, the task that confronts feminist action and theory is to make sense of the various faultlines contained in the contemporary moment impacting the discourse of marginalised women's presence, participation, and therefore, citizenship itself, to be able to appropriate the promise of transformation towards gender equality.

It is therefore important to uncover systematically the hooks and hinges sustaining the architecture of the information society from the vantage of feminist political thought. This imperative is rather urgent, given that the information society phenomenon has not captured the curiosity of Southern feminism for its structural-institutional content and the decisive shift it represents as a social 'paradigm' reshaping the meaning and context of gender justice. The current moment presents a need to thus re-conceptualise marginalised women's citizenship in the fluidities - "the space of flows" that Manuel Castells elaborates - shaping the micro and the macro. This calls for a constructive preoccupation with global political economy issues as also the everyday norms and practices of digital societies for a vision of how the emerging network society must be reconfigured.

The Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society (CITIGEN) research programme, (www.gender-IS-citizenship.net), launched in 2010, aims to explore the context, practice and normative basis of marginalised women's citizenship in the emerging information society. It seeks to study the changing terrain of rights, entitlements and agency framing marginalised women's participation in the emerging social relationships architecture effected by new technologies. The research, located in Asia, is being undertaken as a collaborative effort between research scholars and feminist organisations, and is being coordinated by IT for Change. It is supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada. Participating teams have used different methodological approaches to conduct inquiries across sites in China-Hong Kong, Philippines, India, Sri Lanka,

Bangladesh and Hong Kong-Taiwan. The programme has also brought in scholars from outside the region for a wider dialogue, inviting them to contribute think-pieces.

What the CITIGEN researches suggest

Emerging findings from the research studies of CITIGEN are discussed below. The discussion is reproduced and paraphrased from the documents that have been generated over the duration of the project and also captures some of the rich debates, especially from the April 2011 meeting of the collaborating partners in New Delhi.

The negotiation of citizenship by women's agencies through ICTs in a differentiated public sphere is central to the research being done in **China and Hong Kong** by Ip Iam Chong and Lam Oi Wan. The engagement of the women's movement and women's organisations in China, with both national politics and changing international policies, suggests that oppositional civil society in this realm exists in varied shades. The peculiarities of the Chinese context thus necessitate a problematisation of Western theories of the public sphere, especially in the context of the new ICTs.

Two sites, Hong Kong and Guangdong, with different political trajectories have been chosen for the study. Individual activists (in the case of Guangdong, this includes the story of Ai Xiaoming, the first Chinese woman to have had a PhD since the cultural revolution); a network of professional women media workers advocating for gender equality (Gender and Media Action Group); and a well-established, semi-governmental agency (China Women Federation) comprise the domain of inquiry.

Applying Johan Galtung's conceptualisation of the relation between civil society, state, capital and media to the Chinese context, the research finds that in the eyes of the Chinese Communist Party, a majority of the Chinese people are the 'mass'; they are sources of 'chaos' and 'instability' and need to be 'managed' and 'controlled'. Deliberation is thus limited to the university and media and a highly manipulated public sphere in the Internet. Interviews indicate that individual women dissidents, professional networks, the Women Federation and the party/State interact and negotiate with one another in the formative process of public opinion, wherein the dynamic of 'state versus civil society' does not hold good.





The research infers that the 'feminist counter-public' is still weak in the case of China, and interrogates how in a scenario where public opinion is 'created' and the public sphere 'managed', ICTs can be reconfigured for actualising the 'feminist counter-public'.

The action research project from **Philippines**, led by Sylvia Estrada Claudio and Ibbara M. Gutierrez III, seeks to explore the concept of citizenship as it is constructed through participatory legislative processes. The research is located on a continuum that blends into advocacy and links to a struggle to get the Reproductive Health Bill passed. The Bill supports policy frames based on human rights and gender equality. It has been the site of gendered debates with opposition from the conservative blocs of the Filipino society, especially the Church. Consequently, it has been in the dock for the past ten years.

The research uses the digital tool of an e-newspaper (<http://www.likhaan.org/fil/content/aktibista-nag-training-it>) to intermediate a space for citizen journalists from marginalised communities, especially youth from slums, to debate on issues around gender, sexuality and reproductive health and also to organise for the passage of the Bill. Citizen journalists have been trained in basic computer skills: news and feature writing, blogging/internet journalism, basic photography, newspaper and website management. The hypothesis of the research is that the project intervention will open up the discursive inter-penetration of gender, ICTs and citizenship and that this challenge will open up spaces for reflection and resistance. One of the aims of the news articles produced by the citizen journalists is also to influence elected representatives into passing the Bill, and so, the process is also a study into the active citizenship of the participants themselves.

The project has been cognizant that while the Internet allows the local and intimate to be brought into the national and macro level, there is no real assurance that the social structures that impinge on the micro environment of the project and the social movement of which it is a part, will necessarily change. Thus, the researchers argue that the project must not be seen as stand-alone but as contributing to the interrogation of mainstream discourse through its integration into a larger movement. A central question that emerges is about the ways that the project can define a notion of citizenship that goes beyond liberalism's conceptions of human nature and democracy.

Binitha V Thampi and J. Devika from **India** are exploring the question of how to support the substantive participation of elected women representatives in local

governing bodies. As a part of the research, an online platform called *Gramamukhya* (www.gramamukhya.in) has been created, where women representatives from three districts in the Southern Indian state of Kerala, can articulate their gendered experience of being part of political institutions and structures and over time, forge a network. The main design features of *Gramamukhya* are the information sharing and support group, the discussion forum and the writer's blog. A certain depth is imparted to the network as outgoing women presidents of *panchayats* (local self-government bodies) are linked with the next generation of elected women representatives as mentoring groups. The contention of the research is that while the quota system allows for reservation of fifty percent seats for women in local legislative bodies, elected women face the uphill task of negotiating patriarchal power in these bodies. Providing structural support to these women through the creation of horizontal networks that connects them, is seen as an important empowerment strategy.

The insights that have emerged from the research indicate how the design of technology mediates the potential for inclusion. The researchers argue that to enable feminist appropriation, socio-technical networks of communication need to be not only open and context-specific, but also self-directed and self-representative, offering genuine opportunities for socio-political change. They also note that digital technologies can provide new avenues for re-theorising both local governance and gender inclusion because of their characteristics. In the information society, the de-territorialised nature of communication; horizontal, non-hierarchical interactions between multiple actors; the possibilities for individuation and self-exploration; and processes of co-creation, with constant engagement between the online and offline contexts, can create active and self-reflective connections among individuals.

Pitching their study at the two levels of the local and the national, the micro and the macro, Sepali Kottegoda, Sarala Emmanuel and Sachini Perrera from **Sri Lanka** primarily engage with the role of new media in facilitating 'sense-making' by marginalised women. As a part of the action research, *Minmini News*, an SMS-based news network of rural women in Batticaloa district has been initiated. An interesting facet of this case study is that there are many women-headed households in this district because of thirty years of civil war in the region. The platform enables women to create news items, and in the process, engage with socio-political issues and structures. The researchers believe that studying the SMS based network will provide insights on the potential





of new media to enable marginalised women access public services and information and engage actively with local level decision-making bodies. They also want to test the role of new media in enabling deeper citizenship practices, and examine how it has fed into women's own conceptualisation of citizenship.

groups whose citizenship is highly contested. Hsiao-Chuan Hsia and Philippa Smales are researching the role of ICTs in the political organisation of migrant women in the differing migrant labour conditions of **Hong Kong and Taiwan**. The choice of technology in both cases is the mobile phone, used by the migrant workers to interact with

Think-pieces to capture the fast-moving contemporary

The CITIGEN research network has also benefited from think-pieces that tease out a key idea.

Heike Jensen would like to create a feminist inroad into the prevalent, gender-blind discussions on Internet governance and citizenship, through a focus on two themes; communication rights and censorship; privacy and surveillance.

Margarita Salas offers a critique of the feminist movements of Central America, analysing their distance from the information society debates and inability to grapple with the structural aspects of ICTs. She explores how feminist movements have used ICTs in their struggles, including against the Central American Free Trade Agreement, but have neglected the information society policy arena.

Desiree Lewis' think-piece shows how alternative and new media driven mainly by black women in the southern African region have sought to address the limitations of mainstream traditions in the representation of the issue of sexual violence. In this regard, she proposes to consider how social media and mobile based networks may be relevant for activism.

Evangelia Berdou's piece interrogates the assumptions about citizenship being made within the context of initiatives using tools such as information crowd-sourcing technologies and citizen-generated data. She questions the concept of 'crowd', the idea of 'citizen', and the opportunities for participation supported by these technologies, drawing from the 'Map Kibera' project.

Positing netizens as a sub-culture that cuts across gender in Thai society, **Supinya Klangnaron** talks about the 'free culture' among netizens, which seems to destabilise the traditional gender orders of Thai society. How this 'free culture' challenges traditional values and authoritarian/ conservative mindsets, and whether the common identity of netizens is gender inclusive, is the key focus of her enquiry.

Farida Shaheed seeks to understand how emerging techno-social paradigms shaped by new ICTs do, and can, recast the citizenship of women in a deeply patriarchal society. Acknowledging that ICTs are communication tools that can, and do, facilitate social organisation, she also reminds us that access to ICTs as public sphere/space does not necessarily translate into shifting paradigms of citizenship in favour of women; outcomes depend on who is using such media, and with what agenda in mind.

The pilot raises interesting questions about the meaning of being a citizen journalist and power relations in decisions about what constitutes news items. It flags the need to interact actively with news receivers. The researchers also feel that the larger questions around access to economic resources, political power and military control are very much part of the ICT arena, defining who actually will have access or not, and what the technologies will be used for. Hence, programmes that would encourage and bring in women to learn and use ICTs need to be constructed, keeping in mind their political identities.

Ananya Raihan's action research in **Bangladesh** focusses on Write3 (www.write3.com), a platform for citizen journalism from where stories contributed by citizen journalists, especially marginalised women, is sought to be linked with mainstream media. The research will be contextualised within a reading of women's participation and presence in the realm of new media, including YouTube, Facebook and blogs. Raihan seeks to analyse the extent to which new media gives voice to the marginalised and study the impact thereof on discourse construction. The desk research to map the participation of women in new media and trace the topics related to women's citizenship is currently ongoing and indicates significant presence of a variety of topics, despite the fact that the whole universe of such presence is unknown.

In the context of economic globalisation, migrant women domestic workers emerge as one of the most vulnerable

each other and also with organisations working for the rights of migrant labourers. Interviews have been done with individual migrant domestic workers and members of domestic workers' associations (registered unions, semi-structured associations and informal social groups) to examine both existing levels and limitations of ICT use.

The research seeks to explore the possibilities of ICTs to build solidarity and power amongst migrant domestic workers, while challenging the exclusionary practices of citizenship narratives. Bringing out the implications of differing labour legislations in the two countries, it points to how organising in Hong Kong, unlike in Taiwan, is easier, enabling migrant women workers to be vocal and visible in the city. The ICT connection becomes most crucial especially when it is not possible to have a regular meeting place and day. The team forcefully argues the imperative to create a synergy between technological and physical organising, underlining how a binary between real and virtual/imagined communities would prove to be unhelpful in intervening constructively to transform migrant women's contexts. The researchers also point out that 'cheap ICT systems' such as 'basic bulk text systems' can be useful in the context of the study.

Gender, digital spaces and marginalised women's citizenship – a tentative synthesis

The community of projects comprising CITIGEN suggest diversities within the emergent digital, and its asynchronous relationship ecologies that transcend space and time, creating new subjectivities, practices and





collectivities. The shifts disrupting gender orders broadly suggest a realignment of informational, communicative and associational power. These realignments relate to the re-construction of gender through the discourses of development, economic globalisation, law, media, state, market and culture. What information, association, communication or mobilisation means is significantly determined by this historical-cultural materiality even as it may be reconstituted by the digital.

The projects of CITIGEN, as a composite, contribute to a body of work that frames digital phenomena within the field of citizenship and gender, thus politicising what may otherwise be seen as autonomous, self-propelling processes of technology-mediated social change implicating women as passive subjects of change. Thus, the narratives of migrant women using mobiles becomes the site of inquiry for how in fragmented space, disempowered subjects of economic globalisation appropriate telecom networks for actively building collectivities. Similarly, the interrogation of women's rights action in China and Hong Kong, including with reference to online activism can be recast as the elucidation and complication of the public-political arena in the Chinese context through an engendering of the discourse of dissent in the Chinese public sphere. Interestingly, these empirical findings about agency and collective action trouble received wisdom predominantly in the form of Northern theories.

The experimental sites in the programme are not only an attempt at exploring feminist practices of technology but also the evidence for new theoretical departures in network society debates. They foreground women's citizenship against the wider public spheres-in-the-making, re-articulated through the digital. The blogging, by community members of the Likhaan project in the Philippines, is thus not only about digital practices of poor, urban, marginal subjects of public policy. They may also be seen as new pathways to influence the democratic-public debate on women's reproductive rights in the Philippines that are distinctly self representational, embodied in very particular ways and embedded in real, micro contexts. The same can be said about the network of women in local government in Kerala, whose experiences of learning technology and building solidarity through online platforms also inform us about how to create and sustain new spaces across geographies for negotiating rights within, and in spite of the 'realpolitik' of, patriarchal governance institutions.

The explorations of CITIGEN suggest two things about marginalised women's citizenship. That the formative

and still-nebulous contours of emerging information societies arise in and through situated, social experiences. While some technological propensities may be a given, the frontier for feminist inquiry is in the subversive spaces where the technological is always appropriated by the social, where form does not necessarily determine content and where new social meanings are continuously emergent. Digital ecologies do and can carry feminist imprint, and require appropriate ethical-political influences for progressive social transformation.

Secondly, the appropriation of digital spaces connects to foundational questions that concern corporate and state control and ownership of these spaces. While indeed women's citizenship in the network society emerges through the communities and solidarities in the digital ecology that push the boundaries of space, state authority (surveillance and censorship) and corporate hegemony (the capitalist logic of Web 2.0 platforms, search engines, mobile networks, etc.) constrain the meanings of 'participation' and 'membership' in these networks of choice. It may indeed be possible for women to create 'alternative' spaces and strengthen their agency through digital technologies, but the free spaces of small networks in the big, global digital network that subsumes them cannot be truly free unless they are protected from corporate exploitation and expediency, and state authoritarianism and tyranny. These guarantees presuppose democratic and participatory governance of the network society and its constitutive digital elements, with appropriate public policies at national, transnational and global levels that enable communities of solidarity to form and sustain as truly free, 'public' spaces. Unfortunately, appropriate public policies in this area are conspicuous by their absence in most countries, as also at the global level.

The CITIGEN researches illustrate how women's citizenship materialises in the information society not just by pushing the boundaries of space, but in causing a shift in the equations of power in newly emergent space. Thus, gender-equal citizenship in the information society is not merely about women's inclusion, but about autonomy, the principle at the heart of feminism.

IT for Change is an India-based NGO working on information society theory and practice from the standpoint of equity and social justice. Our work spans a range of development arenas: gender, education, community media and governance. The CITIGEN research programme (www.gender-IS-citizenship.net) is coordinated by IT for Change (www.ITforChange.net) and supported by IDRC (www.idrc.ca).

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